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Black History Scholar Receives National Award For Historic Preservation

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May 29, 2008

DURHAM, N.H. -- Social activist Valerie Cunningham, coordinator of Community Black Heritage Partnerships at the University of New Hampshire, will be honored as a Restore America Hero by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and HGTV Restore America.

Cunningham will receive the honor Tuesday, June 3, 2008, at the Restore America Gala at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. The Restore America Hero awards are conferred upon public officials, private citizens, and corporations whose energy, vision, and leadership have made significant contributions to the preservation of our historic and cultural legacy – the buildings, collections, documents, and works of art that tell America's story.

“For the past five years, the National Trust has proudly joined with HGTV to salute the Restore America Heroes who are making significant contributions to the preservation of America's communities through their unyielding commitment, vision, and leadership,” said Richard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. “This year's award winners represent the diverse range of important preservation work being done across the country, and by the Department of State – worldwide, to key U.S. owned buildings. The National Trust is pleased to honor them.”

Past honorees include Sen. Hillary Clinton, musician Don Henley, actress Diane Keaton, the Boston Red Sox, Sen. Ted Kennedy, and First Lady Laura Bush.

“ When I began researching the early black history of New Hampshire, I was as surprised as anyone to discover that a community of Africans and black Americans had been enslaved right here in my home town, and I was fascinated to learn how free blacks across the state managed to survive the hostile environment. It was not a calculated decision so much as an irresistible sense of obligation to try to preserve the memory of those long forgotten souls, and to protect our recent history from slipping into obscurity,” Cunningham said.

A native of Portsmouth, Cunningham is being honored for her preservation work, including New Hampshire's first black church, now called The Pearl of Portsmouth, and Rock Rest, a summer guest house in Kittery, Maine, that was operated by the same African American family from the 1940s to the 1970s. One of few such establishments in New England, Rock Rest remains largely intact with an accumulation of furnishings, photographs, letters, business records, and other documents. Catering to African American guests from the New York, New Jersey and Philadelphia areas, Rock Rest provided an opportunity for professional couples to enjoy a relaxing summer vacation in Maine during the era of segregation.

Cunningham has been a social activist since the 1960s. She is a founder and president of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail, a self-guided walking and driving tour of landmarks

representing more than 360 years of African-American history in New Hampshire. She has been a founding member of several civic organizations, including the Blues Bank Collective, the New Hampshire Circle of Friends, the Seacoast African American Cultural Center, and the Portsmouth-Greater Accra Sister City Connection. In 2005, she was appointed by Gov. Lynch to serve on the N.H. Commission on the Status of Women.

Her publications include articles on African-American history and culture in New Hampshire and southern Maine. She is co-author, with historian Mark J. Sammons, of "Black Portsmouth: Three Centuries of African American Heritage" (University Press of New England, 2004).

"Without memory, there is no history, so Valerie Cunningham has labored for four decades to preserve the remembrance of African American life stories and historic sites in the Seacoast region. She explored archives to discover the untold stories of slavery in early Portsmouth when confronted with history books and teachers who were silent on the subject. She talked with her elders, conducting oral histories before the thread of memory was cut by death or neglect," said David Watters, director of the UNH Center for New England Culture.

As coordinator of UNH's Community Black Heritage Partnerships, Cunningham has brought history into UNH classrooms and involved students in historic preservation work. The establishment of the African American Collection with UNH's Milne Special Collections, including the archives of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail and Rock Rest, donated by Valerie Cunningham, means that more stories will make the perilous passage from memory to history.

"At times of crisis in historic preservation, Valerie Cunningham has made heroic efforts, such as during the unearthing of the colonial-era Negro Burying Ground on Chestnut Street in Portsmouth during a water main project, and the documentation of Rock Rest," Watters said. "The completion of the program to mark more than a dozen sites on the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail has put Portsmouth on the map as one of the places people can go to see the sites associated with nearly 400 years of African American history in New England."

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